Is Methodological Individualism a Reductionist Approach?

Francesco Di Iorio
DUKE University

francesco.di.iorio@duke.edu

1. Introduction

Methodological individualism (MI) is the theory in which the exclusive motor of history and social dynamics are the individuals, whose actions produce intentional and unintentional effects (see Boudon 1991). Due to this fact, MI challenges the socio-cultural determinism that is defended by methodological holism (MH). According to the latter approach, the causes of social processes must be sought outside the individual. They must be lodged in super-individual factors. MH assumes that at least a part of actors’ consciousness – the part that incorporates the collective beliefs that are largely shared within a certain social group (for instance, the shared ethical judgments within a specific culture) – is nothing but the emanation of macro-laws that govern the social system as a whole, where social system means something that exists “out there” as a given reality, independently of the individuals.

This paper attempts to eliminate a common misunderstanding about MI. According to a widespread interpretation, since MI affirms that the
individuals are the only motor of history, it is a form of reductionism that tends to describe social phenomena solely in terms of psychological or individual properties. MI is viewed to be incompatible both in reference to societal concepts and to the systemic analysis of social world. Moreover, it is accused of denying the relevance of social conditioning. We will contend that the reductionist interpretation of MI is misguided. As will be clarified, this interpretation stems from confusion between ontological nominalism – the idea that only individuals exist, while collective entities do not exist as independent substances and cannot be considered as objects of study – and reductionism.

We will argue that the true point of contrast between MI and MH is not related at all to the issue of reductionism. Unlike what is often stated, both are systemic approaches. Their difference rather depends on the fact that, while MI links the concepts of system, emergent properties, and social conditioning to those of interpretative approach, nominalism, and unintended consequences of the subjective intentionality, holistic systemism does not. The latter assumes that social structures are given realities, which can be described as independent substances, and considers action and social order as epiphenomena of these superhuman entities.

One of the main aims of this paper is to criticize the concept of “structural individualism,” which is becoming largely popular within social sciences and which is the more recent version of the reductionist interpretation of MI. Structural individualism, which is defended among others by Bunge (1996), Bearman, Hedström (Hedström and Bearman 2009), Pettit (1993), and Udhen (2001), is assumed to be a middle ground between holism and individualism – a “synthesis” of these two approaches. Structural individualism regards the individualist idea that the actors’ views and intentions matter and cannot be erased from the analysis as unimportant – an idea that is not shared by holist sociology. However, according to structural individualism, MI is partly wrong because it denies the systemic nature of society and the fact that the social system
implies constraints for the actors. From the standpoint of structural individualism, authors such as Menger and Weber must be considered to be reductionists. Structural individualists attempt to improve what they consider the traditional and reductionist individualism by merging it with a systemic theory of society. They assume the systemic approach to social phenomena to be a specific and peculiar feature of the holist tradition.

We will contend that structural individualism is based on presuppositions that are both logically and historically incorrect. Although it is true that some methodological individualists defended the idea that MI is a reductionist approach, the majority of the main theorists of MI explicitly endorsed a systemic view. Moreover, even those individualists like John Stuart Mill, who argued the necessity of a psychological reductionism, did not really follow a reductionist approach in practice. Mills’ analysis of phenomena like puritanism, market, and bureaucracy are implicitly based on systemic and irreducible concepts. The real differences between Mills and Comte, who Mills criticized for his sociological holism, are related to divergences concerning the epistemology of action and the ontology of collective nouns, rather than to the issue of reductionism (see Di Nuoscio 2006).

Strictly speaking, there are no examples of reductionist explanations of social phenomena because, as Popper (1957) has clearly argued, reductionism is logically impossible. As we will try to make clear, the reductionist definition of MI cannot describe the nature of the empirical analyses that are provided by individualist authors.

Already in 1883, Menger, pointed out that MI is not a form of reductionism. According to MI, he argues, the individual’s intentions and actions must be considered as parts of a structure. For Menger (1985, p. 142), “social structures...in respect to their parts are higher units”. Moreover, they are endowed with “functions” which “are vital expressions of these structures in their totality” (p. 139). Society is a system because each part of it – each individual or each social subsystem (like a family or a firm) –
serves the normal function of the whole, conditions and influences it, and in turn is conditioned and influenced by it in its normal nature and its normal function. (p. 147)

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sketches the ontological differences between holism and MI. Section 3 shows one of the two reasons why, unlike what is assumed by structural individualists, the holist ontology is not really systemic (the second reason is analyzed in section 7). Section 4 focuses on the fact that the use of the concept of system by the holist tradition is inextricably linked to the assumption that the individual is a remote-controlled being rather than a free being. Section 5 briefly recalls the differences between the anti-rationalist individualism and the atomist and contractualist interpretations of society. Section 6 shows why the empirical explanations of social phenomena provided by MI cannot be described in terms of psychological reductionism. Section 7 clarifies that the defense of the ontological nominalism has nothing to do with the defense of a reductionist program and points out that a consistent systemic prospective can only be based on nominalism. Section 8 investigates the way the individualist systemism is linked to a theory of intersubjectivity. Section 9 explains the concept of social conditioning from the standpoint of MI. Section 10 focuses on the connections between linguistic analysis and the widespread belief that MI is an attempt to develop reductionist explanations of social phenomena. Section 11 draws the conclusions from the arguments provided in the previous sections and criticizes the concept of structural individualism.

2. Two Different Ontologies

From the standpoint of MH, social ‘wholes’, like ‘society’ or the ‘economy’ or ‘class’, are *sui generis* substances which exist ‘out there’ independently of individuals, similar, for instance, to a stone or tree.
These entities are considered to be endowed with “laws” governing “their behavior as wholes” and the individuals’ ideas and actions are viewed as mere manifestations of these laws (Hayek 1952a, p. 53). These collective entities are supposed to be the only entities that have real existence in the sense that actors are reduced to simple ‘appearances’, i.e. to the reflex or emanation of these essences or forms in the Platonic sense. According to MH, the universal concepts that are used in the social sciences are thus, to use the terminology of medieval metaphysics, “ante rem, in re”, i.e. before things, in things. They precede both logically and temporally individuals who are precisely nothing but manifestations of their existence (see Antiseri and Pellicani, p. 13-18; Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 110; Laurent 1994, p. 33; Watkins, 1952b, 1955).

Methodological individualists reject this "conceptual realism" or "misplaced concreteness" and endorse a view that ontology calls "nominalism" (Hayek 1955, p. 54; 1948, p. 6; see also Pribram 2008, p 121; Varzi 2010, pp. 68-77). According to them, the only existing entities are concrete individuals. As Mises (1998, p. 312) writes, society is not a sui generis entity; “there is I and you and Bill and Joe and all the rest.” From MI’s viewpoint, collective nouns describing social phenomena do not refer to independent substances. They are nothing but convenient ways of talking – synthetic expressions having practical usefulness and referring to a collection of individuals, habits and ideas of individuals, actions of individuals, unintended effects deriving from their actions, and systemic properties regarding this set of individuals (see Hayek 1955, p. 54; Petitot 2012, p. 209).

3. “Wholes” and the Selective Nature of Knowledge

Holism is usually assumed to be a systemic tradition. As we already pointed out, structural individualists, who interpret MI in reductionist terms, want to improve MI by merging it with holist systemism. However, as Popper stresses, in spite of the fact that the fathers of MH, namely
Comte, Hegel, and Marx, criticized the psychological reductionism, their approach is, in a sense, pseudo-systemic. For Popper, the holist ontology lacks one of the fundamental aspects of any true systemic approach, i.e. its theoretical and selective presuppositions. The holist ontology is strictly linked to a theory of cognition that denies the a priori nature of knowledge. Since MH considers social wholes as given realities, it assumes that these “wholes” can be “intuitively comprehended” or recognized (Hayek 1955, p. 73). MH is based on a theory called intuitionism. According to this theory, “we possess a faculty, intellectual intuition, by which we can visualize essences” in an immediate and obvious way (Popper 1966b p. 218).

As Popper (1957, p. 76) upholds, the essentialist intuitionism endorsed by the fathers of MH contributed to the creation of a fundamental “ambiguity” in the use of the word 'whole' in the social sciences. This word

is used to denote (a) the totality of all the properties or aspects of a thing, and especially of all the relations holding between its constituent parts, and (b) certain special properties or aspects of the thing in question, namely those which make it appear an organized structure rather than a 'mere heap'. (Ibid.)

From the standpoint of MH, social wholes are wholes in sense (a). In other words, according to MH, the true “significance” of an action is “determined by the whole” (Popper 1957, p. 22), understood as “the structure of all social and historical events of an epoch” (Popper 1957 p. 78).

However, wholes thus understood cannot be object of a scientific analysis:

If we wish to study a thing, we are bound to select certain aspects of it. It is not possible for us to observe or to describe a whole
piece of the world, or a whole piece of nature; in fact, not even the smallest whole piece may be so described, since all description is necessarily selective. (Popper 1057, p. 77)

This being so, only “wholes” in sense (b) can be considered by science. Examples of wholes in sense (b) might be taken from studies of the 'Gestalt' school of psychology. Of things that possess such structures as wholes in sense (b), “it may be said, as Gestalt theory puts it, that they are more than aggregates--'more than the mere sum of their parts'” (Popper 1957, p. 76).

If, with the Gestalt theorists, we consider that a melody is more than a mere collection or sequence of single musical sounds, then it is one of the aspects of this sequence of sounds which we select for consideration. It is an aspect which may be clearly distinguished from other aspects, such as the absolute pitch of the first of these sounds, or their average absolute strength...By thus being selective, the study of a Gestalt, and with it, of any whole in sense (b), is sharply distinguished from the study of a totality, i.e. of a whole in sense (a). (p. 77)

4. The Holistic Account of Social Order

In spite of many philosophical differences, Hegel and Comte, the two fathers of MH, shared a kind of Hobbesian view of human nature. It is central to this view that, in the absence of external constraint, the pursuit of private interests and desires leads inevitably to both social and individual disintegration. (Dawe 1970, p. 207)
Without social constraint, they argue that “the only possibility is the war of all against all” (p. 208). Both Comte and Hegel share the idea that the society is an organized and harmonic structure (or system) due to the fact that individuals are remote-controlled, rather than self-determined, beings. In other words, these two authors employ the concept of system to describe the way in which society, understood as an independent substance or *sui generis* entity, creates collective harmony by defining “the social meanings, relationships and actions of” its members (Dawe 1970, p. 208). According to Hegel and Comte, ‘society’ and ‘system’ are two synonyms referring to the same external essence working as a kind of mold organizing the way in which its human byproducts behave. This mold, they argue, is settled “over” the individuals “in such a way as to impose a common meaning and, therefore, order upon them” (p. 208; see also Boudon 1971, pp. 32-33; Di Nuoscio 1996, p. 307; Laurent 1994 pp. 18-19).

This particular conception of social system, which denies the intentionality of the individual, influenced many scholars, starting with Durkheim and structural functionalists such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Parsons. As is well known, the tendency to explain social phenomena by merging systemic approach, substantialism and heteronomy developed not only within conservative and functionalist sociology. It is also shared by many left-wing social scientists who, in Marx’s footsteps, often link this tendency to the theory that an occult oppression exists – an oppression that the social scientist is supposed to reveal (see Di Nuoscio 2006, pp. 113-114). The works of members of French structuralism such as Althusser, Balibar, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Lacan are instructive in this regard (see Boudon and Bourricaud 1986, pp. 387-393).
5. MI and the Atomist Interpretations of Society

The theory of social order that is defended by MH is partly linked to an old religious superstition. Popper (1966a, p. 17) calls this superstition, which influenced Comte, Hegel, Marx, and their followers, the “theistic interpretation” of history. The theistic interpretation of history belittles the importance of individuals as historical actors because it assumes that there are “powers behind the scenes” (ibid.). According to this archaic belief, history and social order are not accidental outcomes but the products of a hidden superhuman will. A divine plan is supposed to be at work. MH is a secularized version of this view. The theistic interpretation of history and MH share the idea that there are “hidden...determinants” of action (p. 410).

During the Age of Enlightenment, a systematic attempt to get rid of the religious interpretation of social order and institutions began. However, the anxiety to get rid of this old belief and to affirm the principle of man being the only cause of social phenomena was sometimes accompanied by the tendency to overestimate the powers of human reason (see Dawe 1970, p. 212; Laurent 1994, p. 25-28; Petitot 2009, pp. 153 ff.; 2012, p. 210).

Hayek (1978, p. 3) calls this phenomenon “constructivism” (see also Caldwell, 2007; pp. 358-359; Nemo 1988, pp. 23 ff.). The mechanist and atomist theories of social contract that developed at that time, mainly in Continental Europe, represent an expression of this presumptuous mentality (see Agassi 1960, pp. 252-253; Hayek 1948, p. 6; Laurent 1994, p. 14-16). According to these theories, individuals, meant as perfectly rational beings, must be viewed to be logically and historically prior to social institutions, the latter resulting from their mutual agreement expressed in social contract terms. Such atomism is undoubtedly a weak theory. Its fallacy is clear for two reasons. The first is that it views human beings as being intelligent and cooperative since the beginning in spite of the fact that originally they shared neither socio-
cultural linkages nor common institutions. The second is that, following the mechanist doctrine, it assumes that society is nothing but the sum of its parts, its parts being individual atoms and their doings. Such a view is not a correct description of the nature of social phenomena because the existence of global irreducible properties can hardly be denied.

As is well known, a criticism of social atomism was already being formulated during the Enlightenment (see Hayek 1978 p. 80 ff.). At that time, the idea that social institutions must be explained by assuming that the individuals are not heteronomous, but self-determined beings, was also defended by scholars recognizing the limitations of human reason as well as the existence of unintended consequences of action – unintended effects that rule out the possibility of explaining history as the expected outcome of deliberate projects as contractualist do. This anti-constructivist school specifically (though not exclusively) brought together British thinkers, namely Locke, Burke, and the members of the Scottish Enlightenment (de Mandeville, Ferguson, Hume, Smith, and Tucker). As Hayek (1948, p. 6) points out, this orientation did not at all assume “the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals.” It “starts from men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society” (p. 6; see also Cubeddu 1996, pp. 27-33; Infantino 1998, pp. 73-80; Schatz 1907, p. 558). Although exceptions do exist, this anti-atomist standpoint is explicitly defended by most champions of MI in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Authors such as Menger, Mises, Hayek, Spencer, Tocqueville, Weber, Simmel, Schütz, Merton, Popper, Watkins, Coleman, Elster, Boudon, and Crozier can be more or less directly linked to the tradition of British and Scottish Enlightenment.

6. The Non-Reductionist Nature of the Individualist Explanation

The idea that it is necessary to replace MI with structural individualism presupposes that MI develops reductionist explanations of social
phomena. Reductionist explanations are explanations that reduce social phenomena to mental or individual properties and thus do not consider systemic global properties. However, if one looks at the empirical explanations provided by methodological individualists, one can see that their analyses do not match this concept of explanation.

For instance, when Adam Smith explains the market in terms of an ‘invisible hand’, he implicitly assumes that the market is a system, i.e. “a dependable (not random) combination of elements” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1990, p. 389). In other words, it presupposes that the market is based on rules of interaction. By definition, within a system the properties of the whole cannot be wholly accounted for by the properties of the parts. The theory of the ‘invisible hand’ is the idea that the wealth of a nation is not a property of the egoist behavior of the individuals, but a global emergent property. Consequently, the theory of the ‘invisible hand’ is not reductionist. Similarly, when Tocqueville explains how the centralized character of French administration made the French social and political ‘system’ very different from the English system, he provides an explanation that cannot be described in reductionist terms. As is well known, Mises’ criticism of planned economy is based on the concept of ‘price’. This concept, like those of the ‘invisible hand’ and of ‘political system’, cannot be wholly accounted for in terms of mental properties because a ‘price’ is an unintentional consequence that can only be explained as an aggregate effect – an aggregate effect that is linked to a specific system of interaction based on rules protecting private property. When Weber analyzes the caste system in India and the social constraints that are related to it, he specifically refers to irreducible global properties. For instance, the social control implemented by the caste system cannot be wholly described in terms of the properties of the parts because it also depends on aggregate properties that are implied by the fact that the different actors share specific rules of action.

The concepts of rules of interaction and of systemic approach, which imply the concept of emergent properties, are integral parts of the
individualistic model of explanation. The work of methodological individualists show that they assume that to study social institutions such as language, law, money, markets, or ethics, one needs to understand that they are characterized by, in the words of Hayek, “structural coherence” (Hayek 1952a p. 38; see in particular Menger 1985, pp. 133-147). Following Menger, Hayek stresses that MI studies the development and functioning of “persistent social structures which we have come to take for granted and which form the conditions of our existence” (Hayek 1952a, p. 83). These “structures of interpersonal relationships” (p. 85) presuppose typical ways of perceptive categorization and behavior derived from a common cultural heritage. Very often they also define specific social roles. By providing a substantially stable framework, social institutions enable their “members to derive...expectations that have a good chance of being correct” (1973, p. 106). Moreover, they represent a source of conditioning for individuals: institutional rules and social roles influence their choices (see Nemo 1988, pp. 91 ff.).

One of the main reasons why the explanations developed by MI cannot be described in terms of psychological reductionism (i.e. only in terms of psychological mental states) is that these explanations are very often linked to the concept of unintended consequences. Admitting the systemic and unintentional nature of the social process, MI assumes that the task of the social sciences is a “different task” than “the task of psychology” (Hayek 1952a, p. 39). In other words, it presupposes that the social sciences are not reducible to the study of human intentions (Hayek 1952a, pp. 36-43).

7. The Systemic Approach and Nominalism

According to Hayek (1948, p. 6), the tendency to confuse MI with atomism and reductionism is “the silliest of the common misunderstandings” (see also Watkins 1957, p. 112). As Popper (1966b, p. 421) states, because this tendency is wrong, “there is some similarity”
between the individualist and holist paradigms. “But,” he points out, “there are very considerable differences also.” The most basic of them is ontological. Methodological holists

argue that, since we owe our reason to ‘society’...‘society’ is everything and the individual nothing; or that whatever value the individual possesses is derived from the collective, the real carrier of all values. (*Ibid.*)

As opposed to this, the position of MI, which endorses nominalism,

does not assume the existence of collectives; if I say, for example, that we owe our reason to ‘society’, then I always mean that we owe it to certain concrete individuals — though perhaps to a considerable number of anonymous individuals — and to our intellectual intercourse with them.” (*Ibid.*)

Therefore, in speaking of a ‘social’ theory of reason, Popper (*Ibid.*) adds,

I mean more precisely that the theory is an inter-personal one, and never that it is a collectivist theory. Certainly we owe a great deal to tradition, and tradition is very important, but the term ‘tradition’ also has to be analysed into concrete personal relations.

According to MI, not only must the origin of social institutions be studied from a nominalist standpoint, but also the fact that these institutions imply stable systems of interaction. The argument that is endorsed by methodological individualists is that, as collective nouns, social systems do not exist “independently from the individuals” (Hayek 1948, p. 6; see also Di Nuoscio 1996, p. 302-303). As we have already pointed out, nominalism does not means reductionism. Both MH and MI
are anti-reductionist. However, there is an important difference between them. While the second approach postulates that there are systemic irreducible properties, which concern a set of individuals, the first approach assumes that since only supra-individual entities truly exist, systemic properties are the manifestation of these supra-individual entities. According to MH, individuals are epiphenomena of social structures that exist ‘out there’ as independent substances and impose, as such, regularities on the individual’s behavior. According to MI, the opposite is true: only individuals exist and what matters is the “continuous process of interaction” between them – a process that implies emergent properties (Dawe 1970, p. 213; see also Elster 1989, p. 158: Petitot 2012, pp. 209 ff.). Due to the fact that human “beings are supposed to be the only moving agents in history” and that there are not “superhuman agents” (Watkins 1957 p. 106), action is not viewed “as the derivative of the system” but the “system as the derivative of action” (Dawe 1970, p. 214).

Due to the fact that methodological holists tend to confound nominalism with reductionism, they tend to consider themselves to be the only defenders of the theory stating that ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts.’ Moreover, they also tend to exaggerate the importance of this theory. This is probably owed to the fact that they view it as the proof that heteronomous powers act in history and create social order. As Popper (1957, p. 82) points out,

the triviality as well as the vagueness of the statement that the whole is more than the sum of its parts seems to be seldom realized. Even three apples on a plate are more than 'a mere sum', in so far as there must be certain relations between them (the biggest may or may not lie between the others, etc.): relations which do not follow from the fact that there are three apples, and which can be studied scientifically.
It must be noted that sets of things that are not characterized by
global properties do not exist in nature.

However, a distinction must be made between different kinds of
systems. Consider the social sciences – there are systems of interaction
within which, for instance, the reciprocal influence of the parts is not
based on a set of rigid and well-defined social roles. On the contrary,
there are other systems of interaction within which the opposite is true. A
group of pedestrians walking down a street is an example of the first case,
while a bureaucratic organization, in which binding social roles exist, is an
example of the second. Boudon and Bourricaud (1990 p. 401) call the
systems based on role relations “role systems” or “interaction systems”
while they call the other systems simply “relation systems” (see also
Nemo 1988, p. 394). In any case, it is wrong to think, as many Gestalt
theorists used to think, that there are

‘heaps’, in which we cannot discern any order, and 'wholes', in
which an order or symmetry or a regularity or a system or a
structural plan may be found. ... [A] so-called ‘heap’, as a rule, has
a Gestalt aspect too... (consider the regular manner in which
pressure increases within a heap of stones). Thus the distinction
between ‘heaps’ and ‘wholes’ is not only trivial, but exceedingly
vague; and is not applicable to different kinds of things, but merely
to different aspects of the same things. (Popper 1957, p. 83)

From the above follows that the tendency to treat social wholes as
more than the sum of their parts must be considered a “physiological” and
trivial characteristic of the social sciences rather than a specific pillar of
MH (Di Nuoscio 1996, p. 303; see also Boudon 1971, pp. 1-4; Boudon &
Bourricaud 1982, pp. 387-388). But there is more. As Hayek (1952, p. 85)
states, “it is only by the individualist...method that we can give a definite
meaning to this ‘much abused’ statement.” This lies in the fact that the
explanation of global properties presupposes the existence of the parts
that imply these properties. If one endorses holist ontology and considers elusive superhuman entities as the only real substances – as do, for instance, Comte or Foucault – one falls into the paradox of being obliged to see global properties as implied by a single macro-entity. This clearly makes no sense: “there is no system without components” (Bunge 1996, p. 261). MI is not vitiated by this contradiction. It argues that human systems are systems of interaction between individuals that are characterized by emergent properties. Endorsing nominalist ontology, it considers these proprieties to be attributes that are irreducible to the sum of the attributes of the parts. This is trivially true with respect to any set of things.

8. An Intersubjectivist Theory of the Socio-Cultural World

According to MI, society must not be considered a substance existing ‘out there’ independently from us because it is nothing but a process of interaction between individuals – individuals who share a common set of interpretative schemas, meanings, and expectations that make this interaction non-chaotic, i.e. rule-governed. Thanks to this shared horizon, which is mainly cultural, social interaction is organized “in a particular manner” (Hayek 1967, p. 70; see also Heritier 1997, pp. 54 ff.; Nemo 1988, pp. 39-58). Hayek (1952, p. 54; 57) stresses that the tendency to hypostatize the social system and believe that the horizon that we share with our fellows is a byproduct of a “given” reality that is external to us is an archaic “anthropomorphic” tendency. It is implicit in our common sense, which naturally leads us to endorse both “naïve realism” and ontological collectivism (p. 54). Indeed, denying that society exists ‘out there’ as substance and that due to this fact, it purposefully ensures, as a sort of “superperson” or “super-mind,” the order that characterizes human actions and interactions is counterintuitive (p. 57). Phenomenological sociology contributed a clarification of the flaws of the holistic and objectivist views.
Society as such is a concept, an abstraction – What exists in reality are individuals in whose mind society exists as a factor determining certain types of behavior. If the mental attitude no longer exists, society does no longer exist either. If people were not aware of each other’s existence, society would not exist, even if all the same people were still in existence...Thus society is an attitude in the mind of the individual which is subject to X changes each second. It is unstable and undermined, although it may appear constant and concrete on the surface during long periods, or made to appear this way by the social theorists. (Landheer 1955, p. 22)

As Schütz (1967, p. 218), the father of phenomenological sociology, remarks, from a nominalist and anti-objectivist standpoint, the social world only exists as an “intersubjective” construction (see also Husserl 1970). It is “common to us all” – interacting beings – because it is based on collective and typical ways of interpretation (Ibid.). Due to the fact that we share certain cognitive schemas with our fellows, we also “share a common environment with them” (Schütz 1967, p. 171). This common environment depends on what exists in our minds as meaning rather than on what is outside of us. The individual’s “feelings” and “doings” (which are related to these feelings) are crucial because they “lie at the bottom of the whole system,” which is called society (1976, p. 49).

Consider, for instance, collective interpretative categories such as “friend,” “family dinner,” or “postal service.” Specific “expectations” are linked to them (Schütz 1967, p. 189). Collective schemas of this type are the basis of social interaction and constantly help us to attach a meaning to different situations as well as to organize our behavior. Following Weber, Schütz (p. 189) calls these shared schemas “ideal types.” Because of their existence, the other is more or less “anonymized” (p. 184) within the social world. This fact also makes interaction and reciprocal understanding possible between strangers. The action of the anonymous
other is linked to specific “meaning-contexts” (*Ibid.*) and, sometimes, to “a certain function” (p. 180), referring to a typical structure of interaction (for instance, ‘a bank cashier’). The fact that the members of the same society share a horizon of common meanings largely depends on the fact that they have a cultural tradition in common – a tradition they have interiorized by learning a set of interpretative schemas that their predecessors created. The social world is thus connected to the “world of predecessors,” which is “what existed before I was born” (p. 208).


Considering the social world in nominalist and intersubjectivist terms does not imply the denial of social conditioning (Hayek 1948, p. 3). On the contrary, it is necessary in order to conceive of social conditioning in correct terms by purifying it from a set of substantialist and deterministic prejudices. Social conditioning is trivially evident.

If the elementary actions of individuals are alone capable of accounting for macrosociological phenomena, this does not mean that they are the product...of an individual liberty which is conceived as absolute. Individual action always occurs within the framework of a system of constraints which are more or less clearly defined, more or less transparent to the subject, and more or less rigorous. (Boudon and Bourricaud 1990, p. 13)

Although MI accepts the existence of these constraints, it denies that they are the effect of a superhuman entity that mechanically controls a part of the individuals’ views and actions (see Crozier and Friedberg 1980, pp. 17 ff.). Within the individualistic framework, social conditioning is precisely linked to a nominalist standpoint. Moreover, it is also connected to the idea that the way the environment influences us is
mediated by the way in which we interpret it. As we have already pointed out, MH denies the relevance of the individual standpoints for the social analysis because it considers them to be mere epiphenomena of social factors (see Boettke 1990, p. 36). Rejecting this view, MI argues that social conditioning cannot be defined independently of human views and projects. It endorses a broadly Kantian viewpoint: things cannot influence us as pre-given data or essences, only as meaning. According to MI, the study of social conditioning, rather than being based on the assumption that action is extra-determined, should incorporate the idea that conditioned action is ultimately caused by the way the individual interprets his/her constraints in the light of his/her goals (see Di Iorio 2013).

Let us consider some examples. We already mentioned the structural-functionalist theory of the ‘social role’. This theory assumes in a sense that a ‘social role’ is something that exists ‘out there’ independently of the individuals and their way of seeing things – something that controls their actions from outside themselves. As we have already pointed out, MI conceives of a ‘social role’ in quite a different manner. It views a ‘social role’ as an intersubjective meaning construction which implies specific regularities of action and particular expectations. In other words, it considers a social role to be a shared idea about what a social role is – an idea which guides the behavior of both the one who is supposed to act in conformity with this role – let us say a waiter – and of those who interact with him – his customers (see Weber 1978, pp. 3 ff.). This shared idea has concrete effects, including social conditioning. The waiter “cannot move among his customers giving out blessings” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1990, p. 190). However, this conditioning cannot be studied by assuming that his lived experience is causally irrelevant, as MH requires. It is not implied by alleged pre-given constraints that exist independently of the waiter’s meaning-constructions, but by the way in which he interprets the situation and his needs. For instance, in order to explain the way he is conditioned, the fact that he does not have any interest in looking mad or in losing his job matters (see also Bronner 2007, pp. 166-167).
According to MI, the very socialization process must be studied from an interpretative and nominalist angle. Indeed, following his birth, the child does not encounter what Durkheim means by ‘culture’, i.e. an objective reality that exists independently of individuals and that programs their behavior. Rather, he or she meets other concrete individuals who share specific skills of perception and action. By interacting with these individuals, the child learns their skills through imitation (see Antiseri and Pellicani 1992, pp. 73 ff.). Moreover, during the socialization process, a young person is not led to internalize instructions “that will make up a kind of syllabus designed to be achieved later on, more or less mechanically” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1990, p. 357). The socialization-programming analogy must be rejected due to many reasons.

First of all, this analogy would only be correct if one supposes that during their lives, actors “are confronted by a limited number of repetitive situations” (p. 356). On the contrary, they prove to be capable of coping with unexpected events (see Gadamer 2006). In addition, the acquired memory that structures the way in which individuals interpret the world and behave is, at least partially, ever changing (see Hayek 1952b). In other words, new experiences lead them “to enrich” their “cognitive resources or to modify” their “normative attitudes” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1990, p. 357). Although certain effects of socialization are difficult to erase (a French person who speaks English usually has an accent, and the same is true for a Brit who speaks French), what is learned is not absolutely unchangeable.

Moreover, the socialization-programming analogy also must be rejected due to another reason. While “some values or norms can be interpreted unequivocally, others are...very versatile” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1990, p. 359). This means that following a rule usually requires a creative effort. “Some norms are precise and in no way ambiguous (‘thou shalt not kill’); others might be interpreted in a variety of contradictory ways” (Ibid.). The principle “help your neighbor” – a
principle that finds its origins in Christianity – has been interpreted in very
different manners by political theorists, as is shown by the contrast
between theorists of socialism and those of a market society (see Nemo
2004; 2006a).

Following Weber, Boudon and Bourricaud (1990, p. 13) also
highlight another reason why data on socialization are extremely useful
yet “insufficient in themselves to understand the reasons for the action,”
due to the fact that the effects of socialization on different individuals are
not identical (see also Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 121). The way in which actors
react to the socialization process is not rigidly standardized. For instance,
some people are very traditionalist and conformist, while others are not.
The personality of an individual and the way in which he or she interprets
things, including his or her cultural tradition, is variable (see Gadamer
2006; Hayek 1952b).

Due to all this, MI argues that the holistic account of social order
must be rejected. It approaches the issue of order from a different
viewpoint. If individuals tend to follow a typical set of rules, this does not
depend on the fact that they are “extradetermined” (Boudon and
Bourriccaud 1990, p. 358). They can transgress a rule if their
interpretative horizon changes the way in which they attach a meaning to
things. If they respect certain rules, this depends on the fact that they do
not see viable alternatives to them and have no reasons to violate them.
Consider, for instance, the rules of pronunciation that created the different
regional accents in the United States. It is possible that a young person –
let us say an undergraduate – who has a rural accent and moves to New
York City to complete his studies might start feeling a bit uncomfortable
with his accent. It is thus possible that as a consequence, he gradually
changes to adopt the New York City accent through practice. If the shame
a person feels can affect his accent, this means that the way in which one
speaks cannot be dissociated from his intentionality and lived experience
as holist and culturalist paradigms assume. It follows that shared local
accents cannot be explained in terms of objectivistic and heteronomous
determination. If inhabitants of a specific region share a particular accent, this is not the mechanical consequence of the fact that they learned the same phonetic tradition. The fact that they feel no need to change their way of speaking is equally important.

This kind of anti-objectivist approach can be applied *a fortiori* to explain the respect of shared moral norms. If individuals follow these norms, this depends on them not being motivated to do otherwise. There can be different reasons for their attitude. They might believe in their intrinsic value on the basis of what Boudon (2001) calls “cognitive rationality.” Or they might consider the consequences of their violation as undesirable (they might tend to avoid, for instance, certain social sanctions or the sense of loss or confusion related to the abandonment of familiar reference points). Further, they might combine these two perspectives. In any case, individuals follow certain ethical rules because it makes sense to them, and it is their intentional attitude, which presupposes a tacit or implicit interpretative evaluation, that implies, mainly unintentionally, the “overall order” (Hayek 1967, p. 68).

### 10. Linguistic Analysis and Reductionist Interpretation of MI

Since the fifties, the debate on the nature of MI has been influenced by linguistic analysis and, in particular, the neo-positivist concept of the reduction of theories (Petroni 1991, p. 16). This concept was considered by its fathers to be a theoretical tool that could be used to clarify the nature of scientific knowledge by establishing whether one theory or phenomenon is reducible to another theory or phenomenon. It is related to the neo-positivist concern for a unified epistemology.

Far from clarifying matters, the use of the concept of reduction of theories in the social sciences has led to a sterile and misleading debate. This is because the application of such a concept was implicitly based on the assumption that the analogy between MI and the atomist approach is
correct – an analogy which was already defended by the holist tradition before the rise of linguistic analysis. Within this incorrect interpretative frame, the problem of the epistemological validity of MI became the problem to understand if its alleged reductionist program was to really be achievable. In other words, reflections on the nature of this approach became focused on the issue of the reducibility of social phenomena.

Considering this fact, as well as the relevant influence of linguistic analysis in recent philosophy, helps us understand why the most current definition of MI is one that describes MI in atomist and psychologistic terms (see, for instance Kincaid 1990, p. 141; Lukes 1973). The problem is that, as we already pointed out, the reductionist definition of MI is unable to describe the nature of the empirical explanations provided by methodological individualists. In addition, the majority of individualists do not define their approach in reductionist terms. As I argued, the aim of MI is to develop analyses of the social world that are based on ontological nominalism, which is a metaphysical view that does not imply any commitment to a reductionist approach. How could we describe, for instance, Schutz’s intersubjectivist explanation of social interaction in reductionist terms? It is a (nominalist) systemic analysis of the social world, and any attempt to describe it in terms of psychological reductionism would be simply desperate.

Convinced by linguistic analysis that true aim of MI was to try to develop reductionist explanations of the social world, many authors rejected MI (see Di Nuoscio 2006, pp. 118-120). Those who applied the concept of the reduction of theories to the analysis of the achievability of the alleged reductionist program of the individualist paradigm quickly concluded that this program was indeed impossible (see Bunge 1996, p. 246; Mandelbaum 1955, p. 307 ff.). They not only stressed the obvious irreducibility of the global or emergent properties to individual or psychological properties, but they also criticized this approach by bringing attention to the equally obvious irreducibility of the “societal” predicates. The latter might be explained, for instance, by the following sentence: ‘the
nation X is richer than the nation Y.’ As it is easy to understand, here the predicate cannot be semantically reduced to a set of predicates concerning qualities of individuals because it does not say that any member of the nation X is richer than any member of the nation Y. In other words, it does not truthfully reflect a set of individual qualities (see Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 119).

The spread of the reductionist interpretation of MI implied not only the spread of the belief that this approach is logically unsustainable, but also of the idea that it neglects the importance of structural factors and social conditioning. However, the point of contrast between holists and individualists is not in the issue of reducibility, but in the fact that, while individualists defend the idea that the actor is not extra-determined as well as the concept of nominalist ontology, holists refuse both. The latter argue that global properties are properties of a macro-entity, which exists ‘out there’ independently from individuals. They also maintain that these properties influence individuals as substances or objective realities, i.e. independently from the way in which individuals interpret them. On the contrary, for individualists, global properties are properties referring to a set of individuals. Moreover, they do not influence individuals mechanically but on the basis of the way in which they are interpreted. As we have shown before, this hermeneutical systemism is linked to a theory of intersubjectivity and to the idea of unintended effects. The nominalism underpinning this approach is perfectly compatible with both the theory of emergent properties and that of societal predicates. In fact, it allows us to better understand these phenomena.

One of the clearest examples of the misleading influence of the concept of reduction of theories on the debate about the nature of MI and of how misunderstood MI is today is the idea that this paradigm is incompatible with Hayek’s theory of cultural evolution – a theory according to which cultural evolution “operates...through group selection” (Hayek 1988, p. 25). This incompatibility is argued by many authors, including Gray (1986), Hodgson (1993), Udehn (2001), and Vanberg
(1994). The core of the theory of incompatibility is that an explanation of cultural evolution in terms of group-selection is inconsistent with MI because it is based on the reference to societal concepts of the “group” and “group advantage” rather than on the reference to the concepts of the “individual” and “individual benefits” (Vanberg 1994, p. 84). In other words, the incompatibility is assumed to depend on the fact that the theory of group-selection implies the reference to concepts that are irreducible to individual or mental properties. Due to the fact that Hayek conceives of cultural evolution in these anti-reductionist terms, he is accused of being incoherent in his explicit defense of MI. He is further accused of endorsing a kind of “collectivist functionalism” (Vanberg 1994 p. 84).

This criticism of Hayek is based on a misunderstanding. Within the framework of MI, the reference to societal and systemic concepts of group and group-advantage is perfectly legitimate. It does not presuppose the hypostatization of groups or the denial of the fact that the individuals are self-determined beings because the nominalist and intersubjectivist systemism of the individualist paradigm has nothing to do with holist sociology. Max Weber used the concept of ‘caste’ and Mises that of ‘price’ which are both irreducible concepts. However, this does not mean that Weber and Mises developed holist explanations. From the standpoint of MI, group-selection does not concern sui generis entities. It is rather a selection of shared rules which are intentionally followed by individuals on the basis of a “situated rationality” and which create a specific system of interaction (see Di Nuoscio 2000, p. 178; Nadeau 2003, p. 18; Petitot 2012, 216-217). Group-selection is dependent on unintentional and unpredictable aggregate effects that are implied by the generalized respect of collective rules – aggregate effects that give an evolutionary advantage to certain structures of interaction as compared to others. This view is not only incompatible with structural-functionalism, it is also only explainable individualistically, i.e. by combining the idea that individuals are self-determined with that of unpredictable aggregate effects. The
individualistic nature of Hayek’s standpoint is confirmed by the fact that in analyzing the logic of group-selection, he does not conceive of cultural innovation in historicist terms. Indeed, Hayek (1988, p. 16) remarks that the mechanism of group-selection interacts with another crucial mechanism, i.e. that of the “variations of habitual modes of conduct.” He stresses that the latter mechanism precisely presupposes the freedom of actors, i.e. the possibility to violate a rule.

11. The Middle Ground Paradigm: a Criticism

Over the last few years, the reductionist interpretation of MI has become the presupposition of a new kind of criticism of this approach. This criticism does not argue that the individualist paradigm is completely wrong, like the traditional holist criticism maintains. It is less radical. It admits that there is some truth within MI. This new attack against MI has been developed by the theorists of what Udehn (2001, p. 318), following Wippler, calls “structural individualism.”

Structural individualism accepts the individualist idea that the actors’ views and intentions matter and cannot be erased from the analysis as unimportant – an idea that is not shared by holist sociology. However, according to theorists of this new paradigm, MI is partly wrong in that it is a form of reductionism which denies the importance of “the social structure” as well as of the “positions” and “roles” related to this structure (Udhen 2001, pp. 319; 347). To explain social action, they maintain, the intentionality of the actor is not the only factor that matters. Structural individualists are engaged in defending what they consider a middle ground between holism and individualism – a “synthesis” of these two approaches providing a systemic analysis of social phenomena. They understand systemic analysis to be a specific and peculiar feature of the holist tradition which can used to improve traditional and reductionist individualism (Udhen 2001, p. 318). Besides Udhen, supportive of this
approach are, among others, Bunge (1996), Bearman, Hedström (Hedström and Bearman 2009), and Pettit (1993). Some of them prefer to use terms other than “structural individualism” to refer to the middle ground paradigm they defend, but this does not really matter here. There is a substantial agreement in their viewpoints.

Like other reductionist interpretations of MI, structural individualism makes the mistake of confusing ontological nominalism with reductionism. Moreover, structural individualism misunderstands the concept that actors are self-determined as intended by MI. It interprets the fact that methodological individualists lodge the cause of action within individuals as proof that MI denies social conditioning and is “psychologicist” (see Udhen 2001, pp. 331-336). In other words, according to structural individualists, the theory that the actor is self-determined as intended by MI presupposes a mental reductionism that denies the existence of the social structure and assumes, consequentially, that the individual is absolutely free. For followers of this new orientation, methodological individualists are wrong because they should acknowledge, in Durkheim’s footsteps, that there are external social constraints which are linked to the characteristic of the social structure within which the action takes place and which cannot be described in terms of mental reductionism.

As we have already mentioned, MI neither argues for actors’ absolute freedom nor the lack of external conditioning. In addition, MI is linked to a systemic conception of society. As previously stated, due to epistemological and logical reasons, the individualist ontology better matches the idea of system than the holist ontology. It is a more consistent version of systemism. MI does not deny that there are structural constraints. It is a systemism that is based on a nominalist ontology and on a theory of intersubjectivity in the sense of Schutz. According to MI, individuals are self-determined beings, not because they do not have any boundaries, but because they are not passively subjected to external influences and because their boundaries cannot be understood without considering their intentionality. In other words, MI argues that
influences coming from the social environment, understood in terms of nominalist structuralism, do not affect actors in a mechanical and direct way, but always through interpretative processes, i.e. as meaning. MI does not challenge Durkheim’s conception of social constraints because it assumes that there are irreducible social structures which influence us. It challenges this conception because it is based on a collectivist ontology and because it is an objectivist view that considers action to be an epiphenomenon of external given data rather than the product of interpretations.

As Demeulenaere (2011, p. 11) remarks, “methodological individualists have always defended the idea that individuals are, let us say, “embedded” in social situations that can be called “social structures,” and are in no respect isolated atoms moving in a social vacuum.” The notion of “structural individualism...is... inherent to sociological methodological individualism from the very beginning, as opposed to some versions of economic atomism” (Ibid). Institutions and rules clearly have “effects upon individual action” (Ibid). However, they “have no direct ‘energy’ of their own” (Ibid; see also Demeulenaere 2012, pp. 25-26).

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